

DOLLY PARTON: 'WILDFLOWERS DON'T CARE WHERE THEY GROW'

BY CORY ALBERTSON

At a stop on Dolly Parton's last tour, I sat, amazed, at the people who filed in next to me. To my left, a young, gay African-American couple compared Parton and Diana Ross. To my right, a middle-aged Caucasian biker-chick and her mother vented their disappointment over a recent Neil Young concert (apparently, he didn't perform enough of his older hits). And behind me, a grey-haired Southern grandmother discussed the nuances of her Thanksgiving turkey breast and glazed ham.

Onstage, Parton expertly hovered between credible tunesmith and guilty pleasure, but helping create solidarity between so many different types of people—if only for a night at a time—might be her greatest career achievement. Never mind Charley Pride and Cowboy Troy, diversity has never been one of country music's strong suits, yet this petite woman with a larger-than-life persona has found a way to relate to almost everyone.

It should come, then, as no surprise that director Duncan Tucker asked her to write and perform the theme song for his feature-film debut, *Transamerica*, the story of a pre-operative transsexual woman and her son bonding on a cross-country trip. Parton's "Travelin' Thru" anchors a gutsy soundtrack featuring

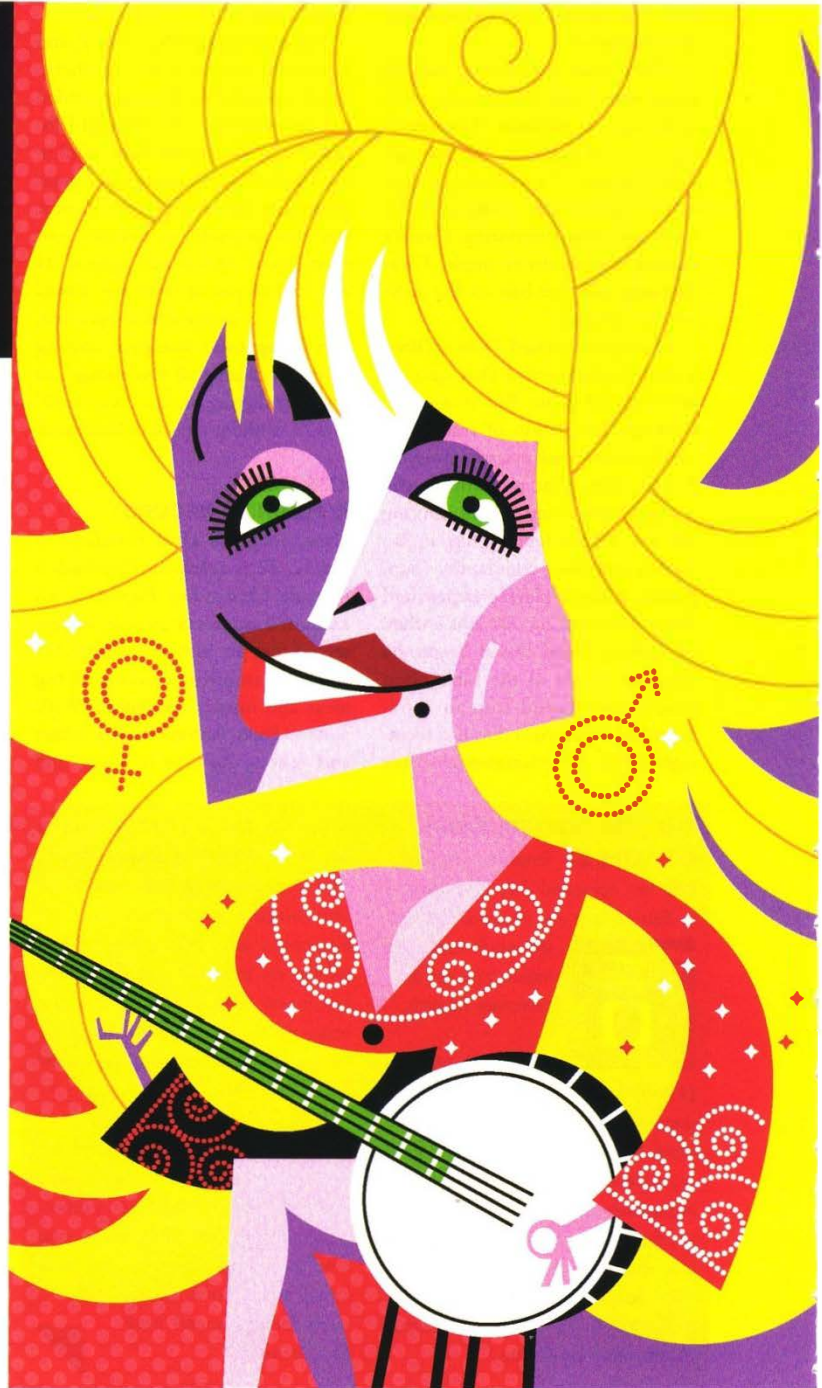
Americana artists such as Lucinda Williams, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Old Crow Medicine Show, Jim Lauderdale and Ralph Stanley.

Before Parton and I discuss her Oscar-nominated tune, she can't resist a self-deprecating joke. "I did not have a sex change," she hollers before belting out a high-pitched squeal. "Thank God!"

Parton says while writing the song she drew inspiration from the experiences of a close transsexual friend (affectionately calling him "A Boy Named Sue"), but the song's refreshing African beats and delicate bluegrass flourishes drive lyrics less focused on the film's specifics and more on the universal feelings of being an outsider. Like *Transamerica's* heroine, Parton has felt like one since her childhood.

I WILL ALWAYS LOVE... DIFFERENCES

Parton's individuality took hold when, as a young girl, she first spied a local woman with piled peroxide-blond hair and flashy clothes. Although enamored with the woman's beauty, she was naive about her reputation. "Momma said, 'Aww, she's just trash,'" Parton remembers. "I said 'Well that's what I'm gonna be when I grow up, I'm gonna be trash.'" Dolly adopted the look, which came to accessorize



her fascination with outsiders. "I looked like a whore from day one—I acted like one, I talked like one, but I wasn't one," she says seriously. "I was just very outgoing. I just loved everybody and do to this day. I love the difference in people. I don't care what they are."

Not only did her appearance cause conflict with her religious family, it yielded scorn from parents of classmates who believed her a bad influence. But in reality, Parton says, it was *their* kids "screwing everybody," not her.

Adding even more scrutiny were her dreams, because in the rural climate of Sevierville, Tenn., life's trajectory was often non-negotiable (Parton's mother married in the seventh grade). At her high-school graduation, Parton told classmates and their families she was going to Nashville to be a star—an innocent, earnest statement no different to her than another classmate wanting marriage. Everyone—including the parents—laughed. Recounting the story, Parton lapses into verse, feeling her 1987 song "Wildflower" best illustrates the point:

*The hills were alive with wildflowers
And I was as wild,
even wilder than they
For at least I could run,
They just died in the sun
And I refused to just wither in place.*

The day after graduation, she hopped a bus bound for Nashville. Forty-two years later, no one ever questions the validity of her dreams—past or present. Currently, she's planning a children's book entitled *I am a Rainbow* as well as an accompanying children's album. And not forgetting adults, she hopes to record a gospel album and a new dance record. All of these projects, she says, are designed to uplift as well as to let people know it's okay to be different. Projects that, if available, would've helped her cope as a child and young adult.

GENDER-BENDING TALK FROM DOLLY PARTON

Do men underestimate your business skills? They'll get caught off guard now and then. I'm not that smart, I'm just a very professional Dolly Parton ... I know what my limitations are and I know the areas where I'm strongest, but I do think at times people will underestimate me—certainly in the early days. But I'd had their money and gone before it hit 'em that I wasn't as dumb as I looked.

If you were a man, what kind of man would you be? A good one. An honest one. A fun one. A smart one. A passionate one. A horny one. Did I say a handsome one?

What advice would you give a man who's considering becoming a woman? Well, I'd just say buy shoes that are comfortable and buy boobs that you can sleep with. Don't get 'em so big that you can't roll over.

What are your thoughts on men who dress up as you? I'm so little; so short and tiny. What gets me is all these drag queens—they're always about six-feet tall and they're huge! Don't we have any little Dollys out there?

Ironically, due to her broad acceptance, Parton says she still gets "crucified" by ultra-conservative religious groups—mostly in the form of threats against her Pigeon Forge, Tenn., theme park, Dollywood. Still, when so many label those different from themselves (transsexual or otherwise) "freaks," Parton calls them friends.

"I know that we all belong to God," she says. "I just don't understand why people can't let people be themselves... whatever that is."